

## the Care and Keeping of Fish Children by Luddleston

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**Summary:**

Achilles knew there were going to be some unexpected twists and turns to parenthood. He just didn't expect one of them to be *his son growing a tail.*

Thank god he has Patroclus, honestly.

# the Care and Keeping of Fish Children

## Author's Note:

So many thanks to [Sprig](#) for beta reading for kid-writing accuracy for me! And thanks as always to the Trojan Horse Party for the creation of Onion.

Background for this fic that I couldn't wedge in: it takes place in 1997 because I didn't want to have things *quite* so easily solved by internet searches, but I have no bearing for what happened in what years re: most technology so if my memories of that year are off, sorry about that, but also I was Pyrrhus' age.

Deidamia and Achilles are best friends/former lovers who basically decided they both wanted kids but they don't really work suuuuper well as a couple (Dei would probably call herself aromantic) so she's Pyrrhus' mom but is not as involved in his upbringing as Achilles & Pat. (Achilles & Pat aren't married but are basically husbands)

Also for those who aren't as involved in Iliad Nonsense as I am, Phoenix actually does go on a speech about how he basically raised Achilles and so Achilles should listen to him.

In retrospect, Phoenix noticed it first.

"You know, you did some odd things as a child, Achilles," he'd said, and he would know, being the one who'd practically raised Achilles alongside his father, "but this lad's stranger than you by far."

It was only later that Achilles realized he probably should have asked what strange things Phoenix was referring to.

"I thought the teething was normal," Achilles said, leaning against the side of the bathtub and staring with increasing incredulity at his son. "I mean, Pyrrhus had it particularly bad, but all babies do it. Right?"

"Well, yes. I don't think most children have teeth that are quite that sharp," Patroclus added, as gently as he could, given that he was calling to Achilles from the hall. "But yours are, so I wasn't too surprised. Figured it was just genetics. His ears, as well."

Achilles brushed his own, his forefinger rubbing at the subtle point his ear came to. Pyrrhus' were less obvious, because his hair was even wilder than Achilles', and short enough that it could not be pulled up out of the way.

He leaned his head back against the tiled bathroom wall and closed his eyes, just for a second. "At least he seems... fine?"

"Daddy, *look!*"

A spray of water shot from the bathtub, soaking through the bath mat and Achilles' shirt, making him jump. "Pyrrhus—that's. Okay. Pat, are you seeing this?"

"You've checked his temperature?" Patroclus asked, still pacing back and forth outside of the bathroom while Achilles sat by the tub.

"That's really not the issue. But yes, his fever's gone down. Pat, *look.*"

"Yeah, *look!*" Pyrrhus chorused, sending even more water out of the tub. Honestly, Achilles was just glad his personality had returned, and he was happily playing around as if he hadn't been terrifyingly ill an hour ago.

Patroclus poked his head back in the door. "Well, fuck me."

"Language," Achilles said out of habit, but if there was ever a time to say 'fuck', it was when your child had *grown a fucking tail.*

"I'm a dinosaur!" Pyrrhus announced, which was about as good an explanation as anything Achilles would have come up with. His proclamation was accompanied with growling noises which were much more terrifying when they came from a child whose canine teeth had grown three times their usual length.

The tail was blue-green and scaly, with a rounded fin on the end that was just the perfect shape for Pyrrhus to repeatedly splash his parents with. It was only the newest addition to his strange features. The first symptom had been little patches of blue-green scales showing up all over Pyrrhus' body, which matched up near-exactly with the places where he got eczema when the weather was particularly cold or hot. At least, the pediatrician said it was just eczema. Achilles was starting to have questions.

Then his eyes had changed, going from a warm brown that matched Dei's to fully dark, except that they flashed when he looked at the light just right. He'd also sprouted nubby but quite effective claws on his fingers and toes. Thanks to these, he'd already popped the miniature beach-ball he liked to play with in the bath, and Achilles had replaced it with something more durable right about when the tail showed up.

"What's *happening?*" Achilles asked nobody in particular, his head tilted toward the ceiling. "Should we... call someone?"

Pyrrhus continued to make dinosaur noises. They were getting more and more accurate. Children were not supposed to make these sorts of noises.

"My dear Achilles, light of my life, *who exactly* do you intend to call?" Patroclus sat down beside him, leaning his back against the tub, which meant he was the next recipient of Pyrrhus' splashing.

"I don't know." His original plan to ring Pyrrhus' doctor seemed less useful now that their issue had changed. And while he was glad that Pyrrhus was no longer running an alarmingly high fever and so ill he was nearly certain the pediatrician was going to tell them to take him straight to the E.R., this was...

Pyrrhus managed to splash him in the face this time, drawing him from his reverie.

"Oops. Sorry, daddy," he said, a very unconvincing apology, given his giggling.

"Thank you for apologizing," Achilles said automatically, because they'd been working on that. He then directed his attention to Patroclus. "Maybe we should call my dad? Or Phoenix?"

Patroclus nodded, although he was still looking over his shoulder at Pyrrhus, who had plopped down in the tub and was now playing with a toy dinosaur, who resembled him more closely than either of them would have liked. Patroclus looked a bit faint. Achilles supposed he reflected this. "Yes. That's a good idea. But bring me the camera, first, I want to take a picture of him like this."

Achilles shook his head. "I don't know where the hell you think you're going to get that developed without some very strange questions."

"Bring the video camera, then," Patroclus amended, waving him off to hunt it down.

Achilles dug the video camera in its enormous bulky carrying case out of the closet and set it on the bathroom counter to keep it from getting completely soaked by Pyrrhus' splashing. He was going to run out of water soon enough. Patroclus was doing nothing to stop him, but was instead trying to measure how far Pyrrhus could splash.

Achilles considered changing his shirt, but decided it was a hopeless cause, and sat on the bed, picking the phone up and listening to the dial tone ring in his ear for a second as he tried to determine what exactly he was supposed to say. *Your grandson turned into some sort of monster creature this afternoon?*

His father's home number went to the answering machine. This was no surprise, given that it was the middle of a Tuesday. Achilles himself would have been at work if Pyrrhus wasn't sick. He should have tried Dad's work number in the first place.

The work number, however, meant he got the receptionist's bright, bubbly voice, which somehow only made him feel wearier in contrast. "I'm calling for Peleus," he said, "it's Achilles."

"Who?" New receptionist, then.

"His son."

"Oh! Right away, then." There was a click as the call transferred. In the background, Achilles could hear Pyrrhus continue to make growling noises, more theatrical this time, probably for the camera.

His father's greeting boomed loudly enough that Achilles pulled the receiver away from his ear for a moment. When he brought it back in, he was asking, *"what has you calling in the middle of the day like this, then?"*

What, indeed.

"It's Pyrrhus," he said. "Listen. Phoenix used to talk about me doing strange things as a child."

*"He's not wrong. In fact, that might be an understatement."*

"So..." Achilles trailed into a telling silence.

*"How strange are we talking?"*

"We're talking 'there's no logical or scientific explanation for this' strange," Achilles clarified, hoping that was enough.

There was a sigh from the other end of the line. *"I think you might need to contact your mother."*

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The phone number his dad gave him for his mother worked, but there was no answer. Achilles left a message which he was sure sounded entirely awkward and a little panicked, and he hadn't heard back all day.

It meant he and Pat were left to fend for themselves when it came to Pyrrhus' new... additions.

For a long time, he hadn't wanted to leave the bath. He liked water more than usual, it seemed, having requested to be plopped into the bathtub as soon as he started shedding his human skin in favor of scales, and tantruming when anyone attempted to remove him. This meant Achilles and Patroclus went on shifts watching him, although Pat swore that beneath the scales on his neck, Pyrrhus had grown gills, and he would be able to breathe underwater just fine if left to his own devices.

Neither of them wanted to test this.

Pyrrhus was only able to be tempted into leaving by the promise of food.

Given that his newest appendage was as thick around as one of his legs, they couldn't dress him as normal, so he wore one of Achilles' T-shirts like a dress, his tail swishing back and forth beneath it and tripping up his legs sometimes. His tail also had to answer for the following crimes:

1. Knocking over a bucket of Legos.
2. Whacking whoever's legs were nearest (on accident, and then on purpose when he realized he could use it as a weapon).
3. Absolutely scaring the living shit out of the dog.

That last one, Achilles did not mind, because finding something that frightened Onion the Demon Chihuahua was honestly a miracle.

This change also seemed to come with a higher metabolism, because Pyrrhus was eating far more than an ordinary almost-four-year-old should. While it was a relief considering Pyrrhus had not eaten hardly anything in the previous few days while he'd been sick, this, like everything else new and different, was sort of a concern.

Less of a concern than anything else that had changed, though.

Achilles returned to the dinner table with another bowl of chicken noodle soup (leftover from last night because it was impossible to dredge up the

energy to cook when one was dealing with some sort of alien child) to find Patroclus kneeling beside the table, holding Pyrrhus' hand.

"You need to be very careful with these," he was saying, and Achilles realized he was talking about the claws. "They're not very sharp, but if you're going to itch your face or rub your eyes or something like that, use your knuckles, not your fingers, so you don't scratch yourself. Okay?"

God, he hadn't even thought of that.

Achilles set the bowl down in front of Pyrrhus and collapsed into his seat, dropping his head into his hands for just a second, just a moment to squeeze his eyes shut and hope he woke to find this was all a dream.

A little hand settled gently on his arm, different from the usual because of the blunt claw-tips he could feel resting against his skin, barely enough pressure to be noticeable. "Like that?" Pyrrhus asked. He took his hand away and patted Achilles again, testing.

"Yeah, that's good," Patroclus said.

Pyrrhus poked him a little more insistently, his hand balled into a fist so that he wouldn't scratch Achilles. "Daddy. Are you in there?"

He dropped one hand, scraping his hair out of his face with the other. "Yes, love. I'm in here," he said, managing a smile. The last thing he wanted was for Pyrrhus to think something was wrong. It was like when he fell over while he was learning to walk—if Achilles and Patroclus panicked, he would cry. If they laughed it off, he would follow suit.

He seemed to accept Achilles' attempt at calm and returned to his dinner. Between bites, he hummed a little song to himself. It gained lyrics, which were: *"I'm going toooo sleep! In the bathtub,"* to which Patroclus had to very insistently tell him no, he was going to sleep in bed.

Achilles prepared himself for that oncoming battle.

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To Achilles' surprise, Pyrrhus declined to sleep in their bed, despite having spent the past few nights while he was sick tucked in between the two of them. They'd all had the cold from hell, although Achilles had been the first to catch it and the first to recover. Patroclus was still a bit congested, and would snore if he didn't sleep propped up on several pillows.

That was how he lay currently, with Achilles' head on his chest, although neither of them slept. The door was open, and the monitor they hadn't used in Pyrrhus' room for a while now was turned on. They were quiet, but Patroclus didn't breathe as easily as he would in sleep, and his fingers stroked over Achilles' hair.

"Do you think he's just going to be like this forever?" Achilles asked. As soon as the words and his deep worry were spoken into the open, he wished he could bite them back into his mouth.

Patroclus' chest rose and fell with a sigh. "I hope not."

"I'm going to call off work again tomorrow," he said. Agamemnon would be angry with him but he could manage. Maybe he'd actually do some work himself, without Achilles to foist all his projects onto. And Penelope would be sympathetic, she had a son only a little older than Pyrrhus.

"You don't have to, the two of us will be fine here," Patroclus said.

Achilles shook his head. "I want to be there if my mother calls back. And I know you didn't get any work done today, nor this past week while *you* were sick."

"No, I haven't," Patroclus said. "Ugh. Today has been... I feel like all the panic has scraped me raw."

He put it more precisely than Achilles ever could, but then again, Patroclus was always better with words. "We'll get some rest, at least," he said. Hopefully. Achilles wasn't sure how badly turning into some sort of half-reptilian creature was going to affect Pyrrhus' sleep schedule.

"I'll make an attempt," Pat said, which felt about right.

Achilles put his arm over Patroclus' side and received a growl in response that made him snatch it right back and bolt up. "Pat! Your dog—" he hissed, looking over and catching Onion's beady-eyed glare from where the tiny furball was snuggled up with Patroclus. "What's he doing here?" And just when he'd gotten used to Onion-free sleep.

"He won't sleep in Pyrrhus' bed, he's scared of his tail," Pat said, settling one hand over Onion's entire head. The dog seemed to enjoy this treatment, his tail wagging.

As if this day could get any worse. "Make him leave," Achilles groaned.

"Just go to sleep. I won't let the tiny terror bite you." Patroclus petted Achilles' head in an unsettlingly similar manner to how he'd petted the dog.

"You say that, but I still have scars," Achilles grumbled.

"No, you don't."

"Do you want proof?"

"Achilles, if you stick your foot in my face to prove that Onion bit your heel one time, I'm going to kick *you* out of bed."

Achilles sighed, settled in, and prepared for a night's worth of the unique sensation that he was being glared at for such horrible crimes against Onion-kind as *cuddling with Patroclus*.

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Achilles was woken in the middle of the night by Pyrrhus asking if he could sleep in the bathtub again. Being a parent of a three-year-old meant that Achilles was used to being woken up in the middle of the night by a tiny child standing directly in front of his face.

Achilles was not used to that child's eyes glowing in the dark like something out of a horror movie, and so he might have screamed a little bit. Patroclus only laughed at him.

After they told Pyrrhus that no, he could not sleep in the bathtub, go back to bed, Achilles woke up again ('woke up' was a generous term given that he hadn't really fallen asleep) to the sound of the sink running.

While Pyrrhus was not yet capable of figuring out how to turn the bathtub on, he could operate the sink, which meant Achilles caught him standing on the step-stool he used to reach it and shoving his head under the faucet. Maybe he wasn't a reptile. Maybe he was a fish. Either way, Achilles couldn't let him attempt breathing underwater, so he brought him back to his bed and hid the step-stool in the hall closet where Pyrrhus could not get to it.

In a moment of sleep-addled stupidity, he promised Pyrrhus they'd set up the kiddie pool tomorrow, even though they definitely couldn't do that outside, because their neighbors were the nosiest people alive and would absolutely notice a fish-child. He'd either have to hope the kiddie pool fit in the kitchen or resign himself to laying down a tarp to keep the carpet dry.

The next time Achilles woke, it was actually morning. Sunlight and everything.

Onion had relocated himself directly on Pat's chest, which was where Achilles was supposed to go, and so he hated the dog a little bit more than usual—that is to say, Onion was his least favorite being alive currently, even further up his shit list than the gopher that kept digging holes in his garden.

Pyrrhus was between them with Achilles' arm braced over his side—he'd done this so that he'd wake up if Pyrrhus attempted to go get himself into some sort of water again. Despite his usual habit of being the first one up, Pyrrhus was fast asleep, his cheek smashed against Patroclus' bicep and his hands clinging to Pat's arm.

He was still very much not human. Actually, he might've even grown more scales.

Achilles turned over, trying to check the clock on his nightstand. It was a little past nine A.M. already. He said something under his breath that he

would not want Pyrrhus repeating, and then rolled over to grab the phone that sat next to the alarm clock, screwing up his work number once before managing it correctly. Thank god it was Penelope who answered.

By the time he was finished with *yes, sorry I didn't call earlier, Pyrrhus is still sick*, Pat was waking up. Onion, having realized that the new bane of his existence, Pyrrhus' tail, was in the vicinity, scampered off as soon as Patroclus sat up.

He was frowning. "Achilles. It's Wednesday."

"What?" Achilles asked around a yawn.

"It's *Wednesday*."

*Shit.* "Deidamia," Achilles finally concluded.

They had several hours before Dei showed up for her weekly dinner with the three of them, but if today went anything like yesterday had, it was unlikely they'd get Pyrrhus back to normal by then.

"We have to cancel, right?" Even as Patroclus said it, he was hesitating. The occasions on which they'd cancelled during the past five years were few and far between: business trips she'd been out on, family vacations they'd planned in advance, Pat and Achilles' pseudo-honeymoon which Dei had insisted on because *even if you're not actually married you should still get a fancy party and a romantic getaway*. When Pyrrhus was born—although they had all been together, they'd just been at a hospital, not having dinner.

"We can't cancel," Achilles said. Even if they told her they were still sick, she'd just do what she did last week: bring them soup, sit on the other couch, and wash her hands a lot so she didn't catch it.

"We have to, and we have to call her now; if we don't manage to get her before her morning meeting, we'll never catch her and she'll come here straight after work."

"Well, we could say he's gotten worse and we're taking him to the doctor, but I'd rather not worry her like—"

Achilles was interrupted by the doorbell.

Pyrrhus' head finally rose from the pillow and he yawned, which was made quite terrifying by the size of his teeth. Literally the first thing out of his mouth was, "Daddy said I could go in the pool."

Patroclus set one hand on Pyrrhus' head and tapped Achilles on the shoulder. "You get the door. I'll call Dei. Pyrrhus, pool comes after breakfast."

Thank god one of them had a level head all the time.

Achilles was sure he looked half-asleep when he opened the front door, but it was only Phoenix, which was good in that he never gave a shit what Achilles looked like and bad in that he walked straight through the door without an invitation.

Phoenix was the kind of person Achilles probably would have called 'Uncle Phoenix' if his father didn't always joke that Phoenix was clearly not his brother (despite how often they were assumed to be brothers simply because they were both tall, bearded, and constantly attached at the hip). Achilles had once asked Phoenix if there was something between him and Peleus, and Phoenix had only laughed and told him Peleus wouldn't know romance if it walked up and slapped him, because that's what Achilles' mother did and it still took him ages to figure her out.

Achilles still had no idea whether that meant there was anything between them, but he'd stopped trying to puzzle it out.

"Your dad tells me there's something the matter with the little one," Phoenix said, to which Achilles sighed extensively.

"Yes. I would have called you, but I guessed that he would tell you anyhow." He had not, however, guessed Phoenix would just show up

unannounced on his doorstep at nine in the morning. "Pyrrhus is... it's hard to explain."

While he was still puzzling over the best way to put it, the explanation came running down the stairs shouting, "Papa says it's time to make breakfast and then pool!" at the top of his lungs.

Phoenix stared gobsmacked at Pyrrhus and shut the door a little too hard behind himself. "Well. That's not something you see every day, now is it?"

"We can only hope it's not something we see every day."

"Phoenix, good morning," Patroclus said, as he followed after Pyrrhus and into the kitchen. "Please give us any insights you have on our child turning into the Loch Ness Monster or whatever it is he's done." The last bit was tossed over his shoulder as he rounded the corner to answer Pyrrhus' demands to use his 'cooking bowl'.

Phoenix followed them into the kitchen, peering with increasing incredulity around the door as he watched Pyrrhus plop himself onto a kitchen chair Patroclus had turned to face the counter, his tail sticking out the back of it and flopping around, like it was taking the place of him swinging his legs when he couldn't sit still. As he set the mixing bowl Patroclus handed him into his lap, Achilles noticed his ears (which were even longer and pointier than usual) twitching a little.

"I can honestly say you never did anything that strange," Phoenix told Achilles. "What's he got there, by the way?"

"Oh, he's helping. He can't do anything with the stove or knives, so Pat just gives him things to stir around."

"Well, that's adorable."

"He helps more with the cooking than I do, I think," Achilles said. "Though you have to be careful what you give him. Sometimes it goes everywhere."

"I think that's more what I'd have expected of you at that age," Phoenix laughed, reaching into his back pocket. He handed Achilles a slip of paper that had been torn out of a legal pad, faded with age. "Here. I brought this for you from your dad. Took him a while to find it in his things, and he didn't want to call so late at night, so I offered to bring it first thing this morning. It's information on where to find your mother."

It was a set of directions, from the looks of things, scrawled in his father's messy, all-caps handwriting. Highways Achilles had heard of, and then cross streets he hadn't, and then finally just lefts and rights, ostensibly for streets that weren't named.

There was a name at the top. THETIS. This was the first time he'd ever seen his mother's name spelled out on anything other than his own birth certificate. It was not as strange or mysterious as he would have imagined it, written in his father's practical hand.

He'd heard her name, of course, from Phoenix and from his father, but he'd never seen a physical acknowledgment from either of them that she existed. He tucked the paper into his pocket, feeling as if it deserved more reverence than that but simultaneously thinking that was a bit silly.

"Thank you," he told Phoenix. "Would you like to stay for breakfast?"

Phoenix shook his head. "I'll be fine. Besides, I believe you have your hands full without trying to set an extra place at the table."

He nodded at Pyrrhus, who was currently testing the sharpness of his teeth on the wooden spoon and doing a wonderful job at putting large dents into it with little effort.

"Oh, god," Achilles groaned, and moved to stop Pyrrhus before he ruined the utensil entirely and/or gave himself mouth splinters.

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Patroclus consulted several maps and determined that the directions Phoenix provided for them by way of Peleus led to a lake. Given how long

Pyrrhus spent in the kiddie pool that second day after his transformation, this was not a surprise.

It was also a lake which would take them a full day to drive to, if Pat's estimation was correct, which meant that unless Achilles *really* wanted to piss off his boss, they were going to have to delay the trip by two more days until the weekend. They'd drive down Saturday, camp overnight, and come back Sunday.

This meant Patroclus was at home caring for Pyrrhus himself, but Achilles called him several times throughout the day to check in. Penelope didn't mind letting him sneak off to do it, and he supposed he seemed like any worried parent with a sick child. Pyrrhus was acting as strange as ever, but he didn't get any worse. He did fuss dramatically when they had to get him out of whatever vessel of water he was spending time in to eat or to go to bed. He woke every morning with very dry skin, especially around his scales, and the lotion they put on him didn't seem to do as much good as just getting in the water.

They kept him in the pool in the living room most often, which, while it involved a complicated process of snaking the garden hose around the front of the house and through the front door to fill it, was much more comfortable to sit near while keeping an eye on him. Pat did all of his work from the computer desk in the living room anyhow, so Pyrrhus could play in the pool while Pat worked, as long as he promised not to splash any water out of the pool. He'd learned to splash it in an impressive arc onto his own head instead.

He still ate more than usual, and he seemed to lose body heat faster. At night, he buried himself under his winter quilt even though it was mid-July. Achilles and Patroclus started leaving his bedroom window open despite the air conditioning running in the rest of the house, and he seemed to sleep better in the heat and humidity.

"Are you alright?" Patroclus asked Achilles, as they got into bed on their last night before the trip. Onion had since become used to Pyrrhus' tail (why it took him three days for that and yet he somehow had not become used to

Achilles in four years, Achilles had no clue) so their bed was unoccupied by any small creatures.

Achilles felt a bit guilty—Patroclus was the one who'd been home taking care of Pyrrhus for the past two days while Achilles went about his normal business, at least during working hours. If anyone should have been exhausted, it was Pat, not him. "I'm anxious," he said. This was something that was no longer difficult to admit to Pat. "I'm worried about him."

"I know." Patroclus pulled Achilles closer, so that Achilles could rest his head on his chest, a familiar comfort.

"I can't stop thinking about what I said the first night. What are we supposed to do if he's always like this? How is he supposed to go to school? We can't even take him into the backyard to play right now, in case somebody sees him," Achilles said. "I know most parents probably worry about their children not fitting in, but this is another level of concern."

Patroclus kissed the top of his head. "I'm worried, too. I still haven't managed to figure out how the hell we're going to get him in his carseat with that tail—"

"Goddamn it, I didn't even think of that!"

"—much less what we'd do if something actually did happen and we had to take him to a doctor." This only tightened the knot of worry in Achilles' chest. "But we have to take it a step at a time, love."

Try as he might, Achilles' mind was about thirty steps ahead of where it should have been. "I just wish my mother would call and give us the answer." He'd tried the phone number again, left more messages, been more precise. On the most recent one he'd described exactly what had happened to Pyrrhus, fearing that if this phone line was connected to somebody who wasn't his mother they'd think he was crazy, but he had to try it all the same. "What if she calls the moment we're out the door?"

"I'm starting to reconsider Dei's argument that we ought to get a mobile phone," Patroclus said.

"I do see the point," Achilles agreed. "Oh, what did you tell her the other day? When you cancelled dinner?"

"The truth," Patroclus said, shrugging. "Or as close to the truth as I could get. That Pyrrhus was still not doing well and you were stressed about it and that I didn't want to worry her, too, for fear that the two of you would stress each other out even more. As you do."

"As we do, indeed." Achilles had no idea what they would have done if Pat hadn't wandered back into their lives the year before Pyrrhus was born. He imagined a lot more of their worries would turn into arguments, which probably wouldn't be solved to this very day.

"You know, I thought about just telling her his flu had gotten worse and he was vomiting—you know she can't stand that."

"She wouldn't have come anywhere near the house, you're right," Achilles said.

"Anyway, I told her we'd make it up to her with a nice bottle of wine next week—and I'll amend that to two nice bottles of wine if Pyrrhus is still like this and we have to reveal to her that our son is part fish."

"If he does go back to normal, are we just... not telling her?" Achilles asked.

"We ought to tell her eventually. I just think she'll take it better if she watches some videos of him like that after we've already fixed things than if she's faced with an active crisis," Patroclus suggested, which actually did have some sense to it. At the very least, they would have to tell her before Peleus or Phoenix accidentally mentioned it at Pyrrhus' birthday party in two months, or something. "Do you ever think... I know your father and Phoenix said nothing like that happened to you as a child, but do you think it could happen to you?"

"Well, I'm guessing he didn't get it from Dei," Achilles said. He didn't need to say he didn't like the idea that it could eventually happen to him.

"My going theory is that it happened because his body was in crisis because of how sick he was. Have you ever had any sort of, well, near-death-experience?"

"Yes. Your dog tried to murder me."

"Onion weighs four pounds, he did not make an attempt on your life."

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They managed to figure out how to arrange Pyrrhus in his car seat despite the tail. It wasn't ideal, and probably wouldn't be comfortable, so they agreed to stop every few hours to let him stretch out his limbs.

All things considered, he was pretty happy once they got him situated with a juice box and the toy dinosaur he'd been relating to on a very deep level recently. Achilles was half-tempted to sit in the back with him to make sure he was doing okay, but Pat was right, the more they treated this like an ordinary trip, the better it would go for everyone.

When Pat started driving, Achilles had questions.

"Aren't we headed to my father's place to drop off the beast?"

Said beast was currently sitting on Patroclus' lap, which was an extremely unsafe place to have a dog while you drove, but his other favorite place was on Patroclus' shoulder, which was possibly even worse.

"No, he's coming with," Patroclus said.

"Absolutely not!"

"The campground allows dogs."

Achilles did not mention that Onion was not a dog, he was a rat who wore a dog collar—which was actually a cat collar, because they didn't make dog collars in rodent sizes—this argument had already been trodden a hundred times before. "If he cries all night because he doesn't like the tent, I will make him sleep in the car."

"I'll make you sleep in the car," Patroclus said, and Onion gave him the shittiest, smuggest look a dog possibly could.

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The day was surprisingly cool for mid-summer, and got even cooler as they made their way out of the city, which was good, because they had Pyrrhus in a jacket when they went into rest stops. He was, as per their current solution, wearing another of Achilles' T-shirts, which fell down past his knees and could hide his tail if he tried. They'd turned it into a game, which he won if neither of them saw it poking out, and he was rewarded with gummy bears for his success. He was pretty good at it, actually.

This didn't mean Achilles' heart rate decreased any during stops, because even in a jacket, with his sleeves pulled down over his hands and his hood pulled up over his ears, his eyes were immensely unnatural and his claws kept poking through his socks (shoes were a lost cause as none of them fit over the clawed feet).

They had only been stopped the once, and his heart had been in his throat, but it had just been a woman who'd noticed that Pyrrhus dropped his water bottle, and handed it back to Achilles. They were okay.

They were mostly okay. Pyrrhus was getting dehydrated. His version of dehydrated, that is. They'd had a little time to plan for this, but there was only so much they could do short of actually submerging him. Dabbing his face and hands and feet with wet towels seemed to help a little, and they let him splash around in the sink as long as they could at every stop they took.

It was only a matter of time before something like this happened.

"Pyrrhus, love, you have to get out of there."

The answer came in a shrieking wail that was as eerie as it was un-child-like. "NOOO!"

Achilles gave Patroclus a helpless look, and received one in return.

"Come on, tadpole, don't you want to come back in the car and see Onion?" Pat attempted.

"Wanna stay here!"

Achilles pinched the bridge of his nose. "They just had to have a fountain, didn't they?"

It was a rest stop, on the edge of the highway, just two little buildings with bathrooms and vending machines in between. And yet, someone had decided to install a little concrete fountain which had one broken spout, but plenty of water filling it up.

Plenty of water in which Pyrrhus was now swimming. Well. Not really swimming. It wasn't deep enough for that. But he was splashing about and dunking his head underwater with no care whatsoever, proving once and for all that yeah, he probably did have gills. He was splashing his tail wildly, and both of them were already soaked, which was starting to become a standard state of being. Achilles could now divide his time into 'awake' versus 'asleep' just as easily as 'dry' versus 'soaking wet with all his clothes on'.

"Pyrrhus, please stop putting your face in that water, we don't know what's in there," Achilles said.

Pyrrhus did not hear this, because he was continuing to put his face in the water.

"I think 'what's in there' is Pyrrhus," Patroclus said, with no small amount of amusement.

Achilles craned around to look at the highway again. Theirs was the only car in the parking lot, but at any moment, somebody would pull over.

"If you jump in the fountain and get him, I'll drive the next leg," Achilles proposed.

"You're lucky I love you both," Patroclus said, tossing him the keys. "Get in the car and turn it on."

Minutes later, Patroclus wrangled a screaming Pyrrhus back into the car, and Achilles briefly wondered where this ranked on the list of worst screaming episodes. Pyrrhus was a loud kid in general, and so it was near-impossible to tell.

The only plus side to this episode (and it was a very small one, Achilles decided, as he shifted uncomfortably in a wet T-shirt and jeans, making the leather upholstery squeak) was that Pyrrhus tired himself out enough to fall asleep. He'd done it practically mid-sob, so sudden that Achilles peered in the rearview to check on him even though Patroclus was already turned around looking.

Patroclus sighed, rubbing at his temples. He was even more thoroughly soaked than Achilles, his shoes the only semi-dry thing he had on, given that he'd kicked them off before going in after Pyrrhus. "That was an ordeal."

"I'm a bit concerned that as soon as we get to this lake he's going to dive right in and never come back," Achilles said.

Patroclus didn't exactly sigh again, but he did make one of those flat *ha* noises, the kind of thing that was shaped like a laugh but wasn't one at all. "On that topic... I've been thinking you should go up to see your mother alone, first. If there was somebody who could watch Pyrrhus, I'd go with you, but I'm worried about him. And we don't know who—or what—she is."

"I agree," Achilles said. It was the 'or what' that worried him, too.

Without looking, Achilles reached up to clasp the back of Patroclus' neck, a familiar comfort he often gave his partner on long road trips. A sign that he was there, that Pat could rely on him and he could do the same in turn. That they had each other's backs.

Rather, that's what it would have been if the gesture wasn't truncated by an ungrateful yip and a snap of little sharp teeth at Achilles' fingers that startled him into veering into the empty left lane for just a second before he could correct.

"Dammit, Onion!"

The little bastard peeked out from behind Pat's hair, sleeping in his preferred hideout in between Pat's neck and the headrest of the car. "Achilles, don't bother him," Patroclus said.

"Don't bother him," Achilles scoffed. "He's the bother, and you know it."

In the backseat, Pyrrhus still slept, his clothes soaked through, the only one who enjoyed being in such a state.

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The campground was relatively remote, and not so much *staffed* as it was 'preceded by a gatekeeper who looked as if they had been installed there for a thousand years'. There weren't exactly any road signs telling them where their campsite was located, but there was a functional, if spider-filled bathroom, a moldy shower house that Achilles would expressly not be using, and a water spigot by the campsite that was of a perfect height to fill the kiddie pool they'd shoved in the trunk. The pool had made the trip surprisingly well, only dented a little bit by the trunk closing on it.

In the cool twilight, campfire crackling, and Patroclus chiding Achilles about setting his marshmallows aflame, it could have been any ordinary family camping trip. It was the sort of thing they always talked about doing, but was challenging to plan around the needs of such a young child as Pyrrhus.

It was nice, even with Pyrrhus making his quite-inhuman growling sounds from the pool. Even Onion was relaxing, curled up by Pat's feet and for once, not seeming disturbed at all by Achilles taking up all of Pat's attention.

"You've got marshmallow in your beard," Achilles told him, and then prevented him from fixing that with a lingering kiss.

"Your mouth tastes like burnt sugar," Patroclus informed him after, getting up to poke at the fire, ensure Pyrrhus was still having a grand old time in the pool, and, ostensibly, to clean the marshmallow out of his beard.

Achilles took a drink from the water bottle they'd been sharing to rid his mouth of the burnt-sugar taste, although he didn't entirely mind it. Probably a holdover from the smoking habit he'd kicked years ago at the behest of a very determined Dei.

When Patroclus returned, he scooted his camp chair over so that the arm of it bumped against Achilles', and he situated himself with his forearm overlapping Achilles' so their fingers could tangle together.

"We should go camping more often," Patroclus said. "Get some fresh air. Some time together as a family."

*"Daddy, Papa, look!"* Pyrrhus flicked water directly at the fire, making it sputter, but not enough to make it go out.

"Your aim is getting better," Patroclus remarked. Pyrrhus only giggled in response.

"Maybe next time," Achilles started, dropping his voice and leaning in so Patroclus could hear his whisper, "you and I take a trip alone."

"Mm?"

"I'm only saying, you look very handsome and competent setting up a tent." His free hand traced the collar of the button-down Patroclus had changed into after they'd peeled out of their wet clothes, drifting down to ease one of the buttons open.

"I'm sure I do," Patroclus said, giving him another brief kiss. It was the kind of gentle flirting they restricted themselves to while Pyrrhus was around and they had to keep an eye or ear on him. Achilles was sure he could sneak

another kiss before Pyrrhus asked to have another graham cracker or splashed at the fire again...

But then the fire went out completely, all at once, not like it had been doused but like all the energy keeping it going had been sucked away.

In the resulting dark, Achilles' eyesight filled with afterimage of the flame, green splotches that began to resolve as the light of the moon filled in where the firelight had been.

It was moonlight, then, that began to gather and coalesce as if it was dripping from the sky and falling to rest on the head and shoulders and hands of a person who emerged from the darkness. Pyrrhus clambered out of the pool and started to walk towards this newcomer, only for Achilles to catch him and hold him still, crouching beside him. Pyrrhus' black eyes reflected the moonlight, mirrorlike in the dark.

"Who's there...?" Patroclus was the one to speak, while Achilles was stunned to silence.

*"My child,"* called a voice, low and not necessarily musical, but lilting all the same. To Achilles, it sounded very nearly like his own voice, but as if someone had taken his and smoothed out all the edges.

He knew this was his mother the moment she stepped into view.

For a moment he thought it was the angle, but no, she was just tall, head and shoulders above Achilles, who was already tall enough. Her eyes matched Pyrrhus', black and reflective, hooded the way Achilles' eyes were. She looked young, too young to be his mother, although maybe that was the effect of the shimmering scales that covered every surface of her skin, not growing in patches like Pyrrhus'. Her hair was wet as though she'd just emerged from the lake, the moonlight glimmering off the water and showing a pattern of waves that matched Achilles' own. It was impossible to see the color but he imagined this matched his as well.

The fabric of her dress was darker than her skin, blending in with the surrounding night except for where the sheen made it stand out, iridescence

shifting as she stepped closer and closer to them, walking directly over where the fire had just been. She reached out a hand, fingers tipped in dark claws that were neatly filed into points that looked as if they could tear somebody to ribbons with ease.

"My Achilles," she said. Her smile showed fangs but was undoubtedly gentle despite it. "I had only hoped you would one day return."

Of all the things, the primary thought running through his mind was *I can't believe my father saw this being and thought, 'yeah, I'm into that.'*

"I... forgive me, I only recently have been made aware of who you are," Achilles said. His own voice sounded small in comparison to hers. "All my life, the only thing I've known of you was your name."

"Has your father really told you nothing else?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. The action made the points of her ears stand out, even longer than Pyrrhus' currently were.

"When I was a child, he used to tell me my mother was a goddess." He'd stopped believing this at some point, but now he was starting to think his father hadn't made up a single fairy tale.

Thetis inclined her head in a gentle nod. "I am a nereid, a nymph of the sea. And you, my child, are as well."

"Does this mean he can also do that? Turn into something that looks like you?" Patroclus asked. He had a thoughtful look in his eye as he studied Thetis, his fingers smoothing over his beard as he considered.

Another barely noticeable nod.

Achilles' heart went to his throat. He expressly did not want to do that. If Patroclus was correct, all he'd need to do would be to avoid near-death experiences, but it was still a terrifying possibility.

Patroclus did not seem to agree. "Nice."

Achilles glared at him. Pat only raised his eyebrows.

"We're here because of Pyrrhus," Achilles said, realigning the conversation. Pyrrhus was acting shy, turning to hide his face in Achilles' arms.

"And who is Pyrrhus?" she asked, bending down to observe him.

"He's... well, he's your grandson," Achilles told her. He nudged Pyrrhus just a little. "Say hello."

Pyrrhus didn't speak, but held out a hand, waving hello to her.

"He ordinarily looks, well, more like Achilles," Patroclus explained. "This transformation only happened this past week. We want to know how to undo it."

Thetis reached out to touch Pyrrhus' head, her fingertips running gently over his mass of wild curls. "There was a time, long ago, when I would have wanted to take him with me to the seas, to be raised by the nereids," she said, her voice taking on a mournful lilt. "But the seas are hardly a place for those of our kind, these days. And you have brought him here with such love and such care, I would think he belongs with you and nobody else."

Achilles' grip on Pyrrhus' shoulder had subconsciously tightened as Thetis brought up the idea of taking him away from them. It loosened now, but he didn't let go entirely.

Thetis reached into a pocket of her clothing, pulling out a little glass bottle on a silver chain. "Eventually, he will learn to make the change on his own," she said. "But until then, here. This is water from the seas at the birthplace of the nereids. You need only place a drop of it on his tongue and by morning he will revert to his original appearance."

She placed the bottle in Achilles' hand, the silver chain cold against his palm. It didn't look like seawater, or perhaps that was just the light making it shimmer with silver-white. "If you should run out, or if he would like some tutoring on how to manifest the change himself, you need only come here. Or if you would like to learn, my Achilles." She said this with a grin, which seemed to be directed more at Patroclus than Achilles.

"Are you... requesting family reunions?" Patroclus reasoned out, faster than Achilles could.

Her full smile showed that her teeth were even longer and sharper than Pyrrhus'. "Indeed, I am," she said. "Bring your father, if you like, I've not seen him in decades. I think he might be afraid of me."

"Couldn't imagine why," Achilles said, a little faint.

"I'm sure we will see you soon." Patroclus was much more diplomatic.

"I could only hope that you will."

With that, she melted back into the darkness. Achilles jolted back when the light of their fire returned, crackling as if she had never been there. The only proof anything had happened at all was the glass bottle in his hand, cool despite the heat of his palm.

That, and Pyrrhus waving at the dark, saying, "'bye, Gramma!"

— — —

Achilles woke to a wiggling little body crawling around atop him, too large to be Onion, so it must have been Pyrrhus.

"What are you doing?" he asked, before even peeling open his eyelids.

"Daddy, look what I found!"

Achilles opened his eyes and discovered two things very quickly.

One: Pyrrhus looked his normal self, brown eyes and not a scale in sight.

Two: Pyrrhus was dangling a fat green caterpillar right in front of Achilles' nose.

"Pyrrhus, do not drop that on my face."

"It's alright, Daddy, he doesn't bite!"

"That doesn't mean I want him on my nose—Py—"!

The caterpillar plopped onto Achilles' cheek, wriggling for a second, and then rolled off and got stuck in his hair. The resulting commotion woke Patroclus and Onion both, and for several minutes the tent was a cacophony of screaming, barking, and Pyrrhus howling with laughter.

**Author's Note:**

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